



city of CHARLOTTE

March 3, 2011

Representative Mark Ouimet, Chair, and Members
Committee on Local, Intergovernmental, and Regional Affairs
Michigan House of Representatives
House Office Building
Lansing, MI 48933

Re: Intergovernmental Cooperation

I wish to thank Representative Ouimet and Committee members for the opportunity to provide information on the subject of intergovernmental cooperation.

The City of Charlotte has a long history of cooperating with neighboring governments for the purpose of providing more cost effective services. The premier example of this effort is found in the delivery of fire suppression, hazardous materials and emergency medical response services.

For more than seventy years, a contractual relationship has existed between the City of Charlotte and the Rural Fire Association. The Rural Fire Association comprises five townships. The service area covers the City, all of three township and parts of two other townships for a total of 144 square miles. In 2010, members of the department responded to 620 alarms, an average of one call every 14 hours. The average response time was six and one-half minutes. Response was handled by a staff of six full-time firefighters and 30 volunteers. The Department operates two stations, owned by the City, twenty-four hours per day and utilizes seven firefighting vehicles.

The cost of operating the department, excluding capital investments, is \$900,000. This cost is divided among the City and townships based on the number of emergency responses that take place each year within each of the jurisdictions. Firefighting vehicles, except for one vehicle used exclusively in the City, are jointly owned by the City and the Rural Fire Association. Fifty percent of the cost of purchasing a new vehicle is paid by the City; the remaining fifty percent is divided among the members of the Rural Fire Association. Prior to the City's adoption of the budget for the Fire Department, the Rural Fire Association is afforded an opportunity for input.

This method of organizing for Fire Department services in the Charlotte Area has enabled local units of government to avoid duplicating equipment, buildings, and administration. As a result, citizens receive quality services at a very modest cost. It is important to note that this approach developed in the absence of the statutes addressing intergovernmental cooperation that are on this Committee's agenda.

The success of this cooperative relationship has resulted in similar joint ventures for the provision of ambulance services, a recycling center, and a recreation cooperative. In

addition, the City has negotiated development cooperation agreements with its two neighboring townships that avoid boundary disputes, provide for tax sharing, and enable orderly development without the sprawl of urban-style uses into rural settings.

This Committee is currently considering House Bills 4309, 4310, 4311 and 4312, all of which address intergovernmental relations. These bills focus on addressing impediments to cooperative service delivery in current law that result from labor guarantees. This is an important matter in that personnel costs are, for most local government services, the single largest component of the operating budget. Eliminating the presumption in favor of current employees should encourage greater use of state laws intended to facilitate cooperative service delivery.

That cannot be the end of the efforts of this Committee if it is sincerely interested in encouraging a more rational and cost effective means of delivering local government services. For many years, Michigan has had more local government than it can afford. Further, state government has failed to provide a comprehensive solution to the challenges of organizing local government.

Local governments are instrumentalities of the state. They are created by the state for the purpose of carrying out state functions. The structure of local government, in place in Michigan since before the current state constitution was written in 1963, no longer serves as the best means of providing necessary services. I support this contention by pointing out the myriad statutes that provide for the creation of special purpose units of government for functions such as utility, library, recreation, and transportation services.

In addition, Michigan has failed to provide for orderly growth of its urban areas. Annexation disputes among local governments are frequent. The state response in the form of tax sharing agreements fails to address the underlying problem: Mature, developed communities are being starved for resources by newer, developing communities.

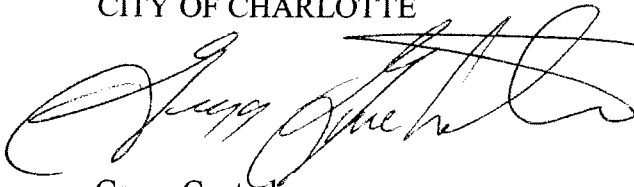
I believe that action is warranted on several fronts:

- A comprehensive overhaul of state statutes related to intergovernmental cooperation should be undertaken so as to provide a single approach that can be taken in a variety of settings addressing a wide range of government services. It should be made more difficult for citizens to challenge through the ballot box the efforts of well-intended elected officials to undertake cooperative ventures.
- Incentives should be provided to encourage the consolidation of local units of government in much the same way that the state fostered school consolidation in the past.
- Current forms of government should be abandoned in favor of alternative forms that better meet the needs of state citizens. We should look to systems in place in other states to identify best practices that could be employed in Michigan.

- Working within the current structure of local government, it should be made easier for home rule cities to revert to the home rule village form of government. Unlike cities, villages are a part of the townships within which they are located and village residents are also considered residents of the township. The conversion to the village form of government would automatically result in joint provision of services such as the conduct of elections, assessing of property and collection of taxes.

The reform of local government is a major undertaking but one that should not be avoided, despite the complexity and potential political costs. The fiscal challenges facing the state and its local units of government warrant bold action without delay.

CITY OF CHARLOTTE

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gregg Guetschow", written over a horizontal line.

Gregg Guetschow
City Manager

Brown to head up fire dept.

By **RACHEL GRECO**

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CHARLOTTE — To say Dave Brown chose fire fighting or that fire fighting chose him doesn't quite explain how Charlotte's next fire chief got his start.

It wasn't an accidental career choice — but it was an unexpected one.

This May Brown, a full-time captain and assistant fire chief, with the department, which serves the city and five outlying townships, will assume the job.

But when he started with the fire department as a volunteer in 1980 he was 18 years old and he admits to knowing very little about fighting fires.

Family ties

Brown was interested, he said, because his father-in-law Ed Fremdy was actively involved in the department from 1963 to 1981.

It looked fun and exciting, so Brown, who was employed at Spartan Motors at the time, applied.

The now veteran still remembers his first house fire. He was asked to break some windows near the blaze. "We took out nearly every window in the house instead," Brown recalled. "We were ambitious."

Then-chief Cal Fullerton stopped Brown just before he destroyed the home's picture window.

Kevin Fullerton, who will retire from the chief's position this spring, is Cal's son and a long-time veteran as well. He said the city's department has many firefighters who grew up with the profession, having been raised in a family connected to the department.

"Some of the fire fighters started going to fires when they could walk," said Fullerton.

And although Brown, who grew up in Charlotte, didn't have that history, Fullerton said he became invaluable.

"He came up through the ranks and worked his way up just like we all

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other volunteer department in the area. First, its funding comes, not just from the city, but also from the Rural Fire Association. The association includes all five townships serviced by the department. The cost of all fire equipment and vehicles is shared by the city, and the association.

And while other city departments have suffered significant cutbacks, both Fullerton and Brown say the funding agreement, in place for more than 70 years, has helped keep fire funding stable. While there have been some cutbacks, they have not been significant.

The department's "volunteer" status is also hugely beneficial. Fullerton said dedicated firefighters, who get paid a quarterly amount that is minimal, keep labor costs low but allow for excellent service.

"We're as good as a full-time department," said Fullerton, who added that firefighters respond to calls within 30 seconds of receiving it.



Rachel S. Greco

Charlotte Fire Department Assistant Chief Dave Brown (left) will be taking over when Chief Kevin Fullerton (right) retires this May.

have," said Fullerton. "He started as a rookie and he finished as a professional firefighter."

Volunteer to captain

"I never envisioned that I would be full time when I joined," said Brown. "I just figured I would stay at Spartan Motors."

In fact in 1996 the fire department's volunteers elected Brown assistant fire chief, a volunteer position.

At Spartan Motors, Brown had been promoted to Director of Operations for Motor Home/Bus. The position was stable and paid well.

Then in 1999 a full-time captain's position became available at the fire department. The salary was less than what Brown was making at Spartan but, he said, the job was something he

wanted.

"I had an opportunity to do something I really liked to do as opposed to just having a job," he explained. "It was a tough decision because, how do you leave somewhere you've been 20 years and start all over again?"

What made the decision easier, added Brown, was that Charlotte's fire department, with 35 members covering 144 square miles, conducted itself like a family.

"I don't think I could have gone to be a firefighter somewhere else. It wouldn't be the same."

Unique operation

Brown said several things make Charlotte's fire department unlike any

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respect and support

Fullerton said Brown's greatest asset as chief may be the respect he's earned from volunteers.

The department's firefighters have already supported Brown's promotion in a straw poll taken earlier this month. In April they are expected to officially vote for Brown to take over as chief.

Fullerton said having the backing of members is the key to leading the department.

"My dad talked about that when I was a kid," he said. "If they didn't vote for him that night he said he'd quit."

Brown said he understands that. As a firefighter he believes in dedication. "If you're sick you better be really sick because if you're not you'll feel the heat from volunteers."

Now poised to be chief he said the job is demanding — but equally rewarding. "You make a difference. You help more than you don't. You save more than you lose."

